

SHOW GREAT LOVE
McCormick Theological Seminary
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John M. Buchanan
Luke 7: 36-50

“ . . . her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.” Luke 7:47

The project that is McCormick Theological Seminary, is enormously important. The name long associated with high academic standards - scholarship, courage to be creative, commitment to the church and city. The project is to raise up, nurture, stimulate, inspire, and insofar as possible train leaders for a church in a world no one

alive has ever known or experienced before. It is a world profoundly different from the one in which I graduated and I suspect that is true for you as well. I think about that every day. And I give thanks that there is a Presbyterian Seminary that understands that it is a new world: a Presbyterian Seminary that acknowledges that something huge we often call “Postmodern” and sometimes “post denominational” and “post Christian” or at least post ? and important is happening to all the old familiar structures, the denominations themselves, and that to provide a theological education for a reality that is now gone, is to be irrelevant.

I love the fact that we are here, in this city, in this neighborhood, in this

academic matrix, in this Lutheran Chapel in a brand new experiment in ecumenical theological education. With an aggressive and bold vision for the future.

And I am grateful for Cynthia Campbell's visionary and gracious leadership, for the faculty and staff and students and for each one of you who makes this important project possible.

I would guess I'm not the only one here who was taught years ago that public displays of affection are in bad taste; in fact, that displays of any deep emotion, strong passion are suspect. I was raised by parents and grandparents who didn't like emotional displays and think it proper to show affection in

public. Poignant memory of my father telling me how astonished he was to stand with his father at the Rail Road station as they said goodbye to his oldest son (who died in France) - US Army - to Europe - Dad hugged Frank and then he cried - never saw anything like it. “Don’t wear your feelings on your sleeve” was the advice - particularly your religion. And so I am fascinated by the nameless woman who shows up at a dinner party when Jesus is the invited guest of honor. I like her boldness, her spontaneity. I like her extravagance. I like the way she goes public with her affection. And I like, best of all, what Jesus says about her - his blessing on her. “She has shown great love.”

She reminds me of another personal hero of mine, the late Mstislav Rostropovich, great Russian cellist who died last spring. I admired him first when I learned about his courage. The old Soviet Union was terrified of artistic freedom and suspicious of artists generally who have an annoying preference for freedom. Josef Stalin had publicly reprimanded the great composer Dmitri Shostakovich who was Rostropovich's mentor and teacher. When his friend Alexander Solzhenitsyn came under similar attack from the Soviet state and feared for his life, Rostropovich and his wife sheltered Solzhenitsyn in their home. And then in 1970 Rostropovich made the mistake of going public by writing a letter to Pravda advocating human rights and

artistic freedom. Shortly thereafter, while he and his wife were in Paris, they were stripped of their Soviet citizenship, unable to return to their nation and their home. Rostopovich continued his distinguished career in the West and everywhere he went he became a symbol of the courageous patriotism that sometimes motivates men and women to risk everything, career, home, life itself, out of love for their country.

And I found irresistible his passion for life, his exuberance and extravagant propensity to show great love. I heard him play a Dvorak cello concert, one of his favorites, with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. It was one of those extraordinary performances at the end of which the audience sits in silence,

mesmerized. And then he did the most amazing thing: he stood up and kissed his cello. The audience erupted. Then he kissed a startled Daniel Barenboim. Then he hugged and kissed every member of the cello section before moving on to the violins. As the audience cheered he kissed most of the orchestra and it was all I could do to refrain from kissing the man beside me.

By a stroke of pure good fortune, I found myself sitting beside him at a dinner party in Dallas - where my daughter and son-in-law are involved with the Dallas Symphony. I told him how moved I was to see pictures of him playing his cello in front of the Berlin Wall as the wall came down. He told me the whole story, how when communism

began to disintegrate throughout Eastern Europe and Berliners took the matter of the wall into their own hands, and he and his wife saw it happening on television in their Paris flat, he knew what he had to do. He took his cello to the airport, flew to Berlin and took a taxi to the wall. He realized that he didn't have anything to sit on, so knocked on the door of a house, asked if he could borrow a chair, carried the kitchen chair and his cello to the wall, sat down and played a Bach unaccompanied Suite.

At the end of the evening he stood and called for a toast, Russian style, with his favorite vodka - we stood and toasted Russia, the United States, we toasted freedom, J.S. Bach, and the Dallas Symphony. Then he went around

the room, hugged and kissed - full face - every one of us.

He reminds me of one of the more fascinating characters in the Bible, a nameless woman who is also passionate and extravagant in her love.

Jesus was a dinner guest in the home of a Pharisee, a religious and community leader, by the name of Simon. As the guests arrived and the meal began a servant poured cool water over the feet of each guest and dried them with a towel — a gesture of common, everyday courtesy. For some reason Simon neglected to extend this courtesy to Jesus. Some scholars think it was intentional. In any event, as the meal proceeds an uninvited guest

enters. So she simply walks in, carrying an alabaster jar of ointment, sees Jesus, is overcome with emotion, starts to weep, kneels at his feet weeping, looses her hair, dries his feet, opens the jar and anoints his feet with the ointment.

There's a lot going on here right in the middle of a proper dinner party. It is a very intimate thing she is doing. Some see erotic implications. It is extravagant. Ointment was very expensive, not something anyone would use for an everyday occasion. Worst of all, however, the woman was a sinner. What she had done to earn that description is not revealed. The loosened hair, the ointment, suggest to some that she was a prostitute - no real reason for the conclusion. The point is she had no business being there — in

the dining room of a proper, respectable and respected religious leader.

Simon sniffs his displeasure. If Jesus should know who she is and ask her to leave. Jesus' response is to tell a story about a creditor who forgave a huge debt and a small debt. Who was more grateful? Simon falls into the trap: "the one to whom he cancelled the greater debt." He reminds Simon that the woman, the sinner, had extended the hospitality Simon had neglected, and then, the point: "her sins which are many — are forgiven and she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little."

Jesus' purpose is to get into Simon's heart. He had already accepted

the woman and received her extravagant love. Obviously she knew about him. Obviously he had shown her an acceptance and grace that touched her deeply. Now he has his eye on Simon. He likes Simon, respects his integrity, his leadership, his devotion to his religion and its law. Simon likes Jesus, is intrigued with his authentic and strong teaching. They admire each other but they have very different notions of what God wants. Simon concludes that God wants order and moral purity. God doesn't want a woman, any woman, particularly that woman at the dinner table. God wants people like her to be on the outside, at least until she confesses her sins, mends her ways and becomes presentable and acceptable. Sound familiar?

Simon's religion is exclusive. You have to be good to get in. Jesus' is inclusive. Simon expresses his religion by abiding by the rules, Jesus prefers the woman's passionate gratitude and extravagant love. Simon's religion pushes the woman, and people like her, away. Jesus accepts her, says, "You are welcome here."

Simon is offended by grace and so, sometimes, are we. Fred Craddock warns about coming down too hard on Simon. In a thoughtful commentary on this incident he suggests that zeal for righteousness can make anybody self-righteous and prejudiced. Prejudice against the prejudiced is still prejudice, he says. After Jerry Falwell died

recently, Will Willimon wrote a thoughtful and funny essay. I found it difficult because I found Falwell hard to take, he stimulated my self-righteousness. He said divisive and mean things about people and causes that are important to us. When Willimon was Chaplain at Duke, a student dared him to invite Falwell to speak and he did. The faculty and student organization erupted in protest, reminding Willimon of all the outrageous and mean things Falwell had said over the years.

When it came time for Will to introduce Falwell for the speech there were boos and hisses from the hostile audience. The speech was unremarkable: not particularly

interesting, and not offensive. When it was time for questions, Willimon assumed things would get ugly, fast. The first question was confrontational. “You preach hate,” the young woman said. “How many African Americans do you have at Liberty University?” The audience responded with cheers and applause.

Willimon remembers Falwell responding, “Young woman, you could not have asked a question that hurts me more deeply.” Hissing and jeering. “It is my most regrettable failure. I have worked, prayed, recruited all over the country and I regret to say that only 12% of our student body is African American. Now here at Duke,” he continued, “your endowment is 50 times

greater than ours, you have had years to work on the problem. Do you know how many African Americans are enrolled at Duke? I'll tell you. Six per cent! I pray that you will let the Lord help you do better." Dead silence in the packed auditorium (see The Christian Century, 6/12/07, Charms of an Ideologue).

Simon the Pharisee, a good man, was offended by Jesus' grace, extended to the sinful woman. And sometimes we are offended by his grace extended to people like Simon.

It really is radical grace and we don't own it. It is not just for people for whom we have concern and sympathy. It really is for everyone.

Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams says: “The true God is a God who cannot stop giving and forgiving, and our knowledge of this God is utterly bound up with our willingness to receive from the hand of God the liberty to give and forgive” (From the Introduction, *Free of Charge*).

God has arranged it so that being forgiven and forgiving go together: receiving and giving are part of the same experience, being loved and loving creates synergy, energy, passion, extravagance. And being a Christian means showing great love.

That's what Simon didn't get. And that's exactly what the woman did: expressed an extravagant, passionate, deeply grateful love because somehow she had discerned the good news, the Gospel truth, that she was accepted and loved, welcome and at home in the grace of Jesus Christ.

That's what the church is for, by the way: a place where sinners, all of them, respectable sinners, and not so respectable sinners, are welcome: a place where those who are excluded elsewhere are included, a place brave and strong enough to extend hospitality, particularly to those, like that woman, who are denied hospitality, marginalized, kept outside.

In her latest book, *Grace (Eventually) Thoughts on Faith*, Anne Lamott tells about the Carpet Guy, her own experience of radical grace — eventually, but not without a long struggle. She teaches Sunday School in her small Presbyterian Church and one day bought a carpet remnant for her classroom for fifty dollars. She took the carpet home and unrolled it and discovered a large patch of mold. The carpet simply would not do for her Sunday School children. She returned the carpet: the bookkeeper wasn't in then but she was promised that the money would be refunded later. When she returned the next day the owner said that someone had already picked

up the money. “Impossible” she said. “Someone picked it up an hour ago” he said. Lamott telephoned other teachers. No one had picked up the money. There must be a mistake. She returned to make her case only to confront an equally adamant proprietor. “Someone picked up the money.” “Look,” she said, in her sternest Sunday School teacher voice, “I don’t want to make trouble. But no one picked up the money. I’d like it. Now.”

He tapped the ledger and the column of checks written — one for \$50.

“That doesn’t mean anything. I’m from a Sunday School. This is for little children.” For good measure she added, “with asthma.”

Well, it escalated from there, to say the least, Lamott threatening, becoming very angry, bringing in friends to help, more confrontations, more obstinacy, now she's using bad language. Finally the carpet guy writes a check for fifty dollars and in deep satisfaction and vindication and self-righteousness she takes it to the bank to cash it only to find there are insufficient funds.

She writes: "I sat outside the bank for a while. Look, I said to God, it's to you, pal . . . Then I sat in the sun and started to laugh. I felt deep inside that I'd gotten it, though I could not quite have said what I'd gotten. I didn't get the delicious taste of release I'd been expecting when a wrong has been

righted, but I got something better, a kind of miracle.”

“Now what am I supposed to do?” she asked God and after a few minutes knew. One has a moral obligation to clean up one’s side of the street. So she took the carpet guy some flowers, with the bounced check and a note: “I am very sorry for the way I behaved. Anne.”

“You want to know how big God’s love is?” she asks. “The answer is: it’s very big. It’s bigger than you’re comfortable with.”

Putting Anne Lamott and Paul Tillich together is itself pretty funny, but Tillich said it, too.

“The history of humankind is the history of men and women who . . . wasted themselves out of the fullness of their hearts. People are sick, not only because they have not received love, but also because they are not allowed to give love, to waste themselves. Do not suppress in yourself or others, the abundant heart, the waste of self surrender.”

The good news is about God’s passion, God’s extravagant love, the symbol of which is a cross, and the life of a precious son: the very one who one day said: “her sins which were many are forgiven: hence she has shown great love.”

**So hear the good news.
You are forgiven and accepted.
You are the recipient of the grace of
Jesus Christ.
Be grateful. Be extravagant.**

**Show your love for your dear ones
— for your family, friends, your church,
this Seminary.**

**Show your gratitude to God for this
beautiful world, the miracle of your life,
for grace, acceptance, forgiveness,
God's welcome — in Jesus Christ.**

And — do show great love.